

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

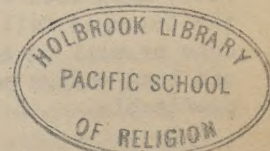
Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

Number 108

December, 1945

AN IDEAL RURAL CIVILIZATION*

By the late Henry Wallace



Humanity never rises above its ideals. The most magnificent temple ever erected first existed in the mind of the architect, and fell below his ideal. What ought to be is always above and beyond what is. Unless, however, we have before us the vision of something better, we can never rise above what we are.

So long as we think of the farm as merely a place to live, either cheap or dearly, or as merely a place to make money, we shall never evolve a rural civilization worth while. So long as we think of the farm as a farm and not as a home, our home life will always be defective. So long as we think of country life as competitive instead of cooperative, we shall never have an ideal rural civilization. So long as our children are taught in the rural schools in terms of the city, by teachers who in their secret thoughts regard the life of the city as the only life worth living, these children when grown will prefer the city. So long as our religion is taught in abstract terms which the people who need most the blessings of the gospel do not understand, without illustrations from rural life, and by preachers whose ambition is to fill or at least occupy a city pulpit, the vacant pews in the rural church will be in the majority.

A rural civilization that will hold men to the soil must be satisfactory materially, intellectually, socially and spiritually, to the boys and girls born and bred on the soil. If agriculture is to be the basis of a rural civilization, it must furnish a comfortable living to the man who tills the soil; not necessarily great wealth, but by no means poverty. It must approximately realize the ideal of Agur the son of Jakeh, whose prayer was thought worthy of incorporation in the Proverbs of Solomon:

"Give me neither poverty nor riches;
Feed me with the food that is needful for me:
Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is Jehovah?
Or lest I be poor, and steal,
And use profanely the name of my God."

For the problems of agriculture are at bottom economic problems. There is no virtue in poverty either in the city or the country, though some make a virtue of it. There may be, and there are here and there, manly virtues and womanly graces in poverty-stricken homes; but there can be no high civilization where the tillers of the soil are

This statement is reprinted from Volume VI of the Messages of the Men and Religion Movement presented at the Congress of the Men and Religion Forward Movement, April, 1912, and published by the Association Press, 347 Madison Avenue, New York, New York. Volume VI under the title of THE RURAL CHURCH contained the report of the Rural Church Commission, the Chairman of which was the late Henry Wallace, Editor, Wallace's Farmer, Des Moines, Iowa. This statement appeared originally under the title "Description of An Ideal Rural Civilization". Grateful acknowledgment is made to the Association Press for permission to reprint this significant statement.

peasants, with children doomed to peasantry, who have masters or over-lords to do their thinking for them. "The man with the hoe," his senses dulled by continuous toil, incapable of appreciating the beauties of earth or sky, the song of birds by day or the voices of the night, the majesty of the storm or the soothing, quieting influence of the calm, can never be the basis of a stable and permanent democracy, as the farmer must ever be, the bed-rock on which our institutions, both civil and religious, must ever rest. A rural civilization worth having must fundamentally rest on a sound economic basis.

The man who tills the soil must have his reward, not a living merely, but a living that will fit him and his for the duties of citizenship, a living worth fighting for in the field of politics in times of peace, and when his country calls him to its defense, in times of war. For as a Chinese philosopher said ages and ages ago: "The well-being of the people is like a tree: agriculture is its root; manufactures and commerce are its branches and its life. If the root is injured the leaves fall, the branches fall away and the tree dies." About all that the modern apostles of country life have done or will do is to expound and illustrate this saying of the ancient oriental sage. No civilization can long endure in a country like ours, unless it is based on an agriculture which is economically profitable.

An ideal rural civilization must furnish ample scope for the ever-expanding intellect of the tillers of the soil. In the degenerate days when the apocryphal books were written the son of Sirach who had great esteem for his wisdom and the wisdom of his father and his grandfather, recorded the opinion of the general public concerning the farmer in these words:

"How can he get wisdom that holdeth the plow, and that glorieth in the goad; that driveth oxen and is occupied with their labors; and whose talk is of oxen; who giveth his hand to make furrows, and his diligence to give the kine fodder? . . . He shall not be sought for in public council, nor sit high in the congregation. He shall not sit in the judge's seat, nor understand the sentence of judgment. He can not declare justice and judgment, and shall not be found where parables are spoken, but will maintain the state of the world."

Compare this with the saying of the prophet Isaiah in the degenerate days of Ahaz, when after describing the methods of the farmers of that day he writes:

"For his God doth instruct him aright, and doth teach him. . . . This also cometh forth from Jehovah of hosts, who is wonderful in council and excellent in wisdom."

With our men of wealth pouring out with lavish hand their millions for the endowment of the higher institutions of learning, with the churches endowing the smaller colleges, with the states spending in some cases two-fifths of their taxes for the education which the common schools give, with the government endowing universities and agricultural colleges, and both state and national governments expending millions annually for agricultural education, for experimentation and extension work; there can be no rural civilization worthy of the name or really worth having, that does not quicken and stimulate the intellect of the boys and girls reared in the open country.

We are unspeakably foolish to expect a boy or girl reared in the open country to remain there, if we continue to send them, at the age when the mind is most plastic, to a one-room school, wind-swept and sun-baked, with a handful of pupils of varying ages (hence a playless school), taught by a town-bred miss, who teaches only while awaiting an attractive proposal of marriage, or (that failing), a position in a town school, whose soul revolts at country manners and customs, and who regards the life of the town or city as the only satisfying life.

If we are ever to have an ideal rural civilization, it must be soil-born. It must be an expression of the best feelings, ambitions and desires of the child of the fields, whose vision is bounded only by the wide horizon by day and the starry heavens by night, and not of the child of the house whose vision is that of the streets by day and electric lights by night. The countryman, whose plan for his day's work may have to be entirely changed when he scans the sky in the morning, and who must perforce be an all-around man, doing many things well, but a specialist in none, is a different sort of man altogether from the city man, with whom the weather is a mere incident and who is, speaking generally, a mere pivot or crank, or perhaps a wheel in a great machine, who does but one thing and that automatically, almost without conscious thought.

If this child of the fields, living close to nature, or rather, nature's God, does not have the fullest opportunity to develop his intellectual powers; if he is not so trained that he can see the working of law in the movement of water in the soil, in the opening bud, in the growing grass, in

sugaring-off of corn when the extreme heat of the season is passing, in the gathering storm and in lightning flash, then there can be no rural civilization worthy of the name.

If he is not taught to regard the earth on which he treads, from which he gets his own liv- and feeds all others, as holy ground, teeming with life; in which the microbe is supernatural to germless clod, the plant supernatural to the microbe, the animal supernatural to the plant, and self to the animal, as to him God is supernatural, there can be no rural civilization in a true sense. (Neither can there be in the end any abiding civilization in the city. The cities come to the country for horses, which they wear out in a few years. In like manner they must ever draw on the country for men and for families, to be worn out in from one to three generations.) This teaching can be done effectively only in the terms of farm life and in the spirit of the farm. This and this alone will open up to the inquiring mind of the country-born a whole wonderland of knowledge; and so in time rural civilization providing for both the material and the intellectual well-being.

An ideal rural community must provide a satisfactory social life for the coming generations. In these days, even in the oldest sections, are at best but pioneers; and whether we will or not, are laying the foundations for a civilization of some sort, building a temple for the habitation of the future. It is a matter of world-wide concern and tremendous import, whether we build with wood, hay, straw, or with the most precious and enduring things of which the mind of man can conceive. Long before the final Judgment Day, the fire will test the permanency and value of our work.

That civilization must provide for the social wants of the coming generation; for the greatest joy in this life after all is mankind, and the best part of humanity is the boy and girl filled with joy of living, whose ideals are as yet undimmed. Better, much better, than even the wine of which the common spoke, "that goeth down sweetly, causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak," is the joy of social intercourse to the young people. Society they must and will have, and by the decree of God shall thrill in every nerve and fiber of their being ought to have. It is for us to say whether that same social life shall elevate their lives and keep them pure, or debase them; whether that age-long and divinely decreed attraction of the man and the maiden for each other shall result in a noble manhood and a noble womanhood, or whether it shall mar and debase the image of God stamped on every little child born into the world.

The future civilization of America depends largely on whether we are to have a playless country school, or schools large enough for games for pupils of each sex; whether the sports of the countryside are to be country sports, real sports without the pollution of the dollar mark, training the young people for cooperative and team work, self-control and confidence in themselves; or whether they are forced to the towns and cities for the recreation and amusement which their natures demand. If we are ever to have a civilization distinctly rural (we are far from that now), the open country must provide its own society, its own sports--sports that are born of the soil and conducted as pure sport for sport's sake, not professional, nor dollar-stained.

The same is true of society. Man is essentially a social being, gregarious, as absolutely dependent on his fellow man for the supplying of his intellectual and spiritual wants as for the supply of his material wants. The countryman does not fit into the social life of the city or even of the country town. The townsman regards the retired farmer, no matter how wealthy he may be, as desirable only to the extent of his wants to be supplied from the store, but otherwise an encumbrance, a brake on the wheels of progress.

Whether in the town or the country, if there is to be society, there must be a social center; and whether that social center is a saloon, a dance-hall, a club or a church, determines the character of the man and woman who attends. A rural civilization must have a rural social center; and whether that will be the centralized school, a church, the Grange or a club, is something that time and local circumstances alone must determine. But a social center there must be, if a life worth living is to be found in the open country.

It need scarcely be said that an ideal rural civilization will provide for the expression of the religious convictions, emotions and spiritual life of the country people. A civilization without religion falls short even of barbarism. The main distinction between man and other animals is that he is capable of a religious experience, while they are not. "There is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty giveth them understanding." That is, man alone of all animals is capable of fellowship with the Divine.

Of all men the farmer is naturally the most religious. He is more than any other class in close contact with the great forces of nature, which express and reveal "His everlasting power and divinity." He is awed by the majesty of the summer storm, the pitiless power of the winter blizzard;

and soothed by the balmy breezes of spring. The flower opens out its petals before his eyes as it welcomes and encloses the dewdrop. The ancestral traits revealed in the young things as they come to the farm teach him of the inheritance of evil as well as of good. The wild life on his farm and that which flies over it reveal to him those implanted instincts that show God's method of caring for the sparrow. His very occupation develops in him the sterling qualities of industry, temperance, economy, frugality, without which professed religion is a vain thing. His success in his business is measured by his actual obedience to the laws of God in nature in connection with his actual obedience to the moral law.

Of all classes the farming class is undoubtedly the most susceptible to religious impressions; and yet from 50 to 60 per cent of the country people on the prairies and in the uplands the nation over have no church connection, and send for the preacher only for the solemnization of marriage and the burial of the dead. Never was there a finer field for missionary effort. Seldom has there been one so poorly occupied; and why?

Partly because country churches are still actively competitive, and are building fences for protection against each other with material never quarried out of the rock of Zion. Partly because the eternal verities of our religion are expressed in terms of a theology that has outlived its usefulness. Partly because ministers fail to follow the example of the Master, who taught the fundamental truths of religion in terms of the daily and for the most part country life of His hearers. Partly because the religion thus taught is applied to only a fraction of the farmer's life. The religion that will touch the farmer's heart, and shape and mold must not appeal to his emotions alone, although emotion has its place; nor to reason alone, although that has a large place. It must take in his whole life--the plowing and sowing and cultivating and reaping; his home life; the ethics of his business; his political life; the education of his children, and their sports and plays as well.

The fatherhood of God revealed in the Man who was declared to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead; a life begun here, continuing in the life to come by those who have a living faith in the Risen One; the brotherhood of man expressed by brotherly deeds; the duty of the farmer to help in every way possible his struggling brother farmers--these are the great fundamental truths that appeal to God's hired man, or rather helper, through whom and by whom he feeds and clothes the world. The farmer will sit at the feet of the sincere man, who knows the heart and life of the farmer, and who interprets to him the will of God in terms of farm life. For the support of a gospel of this sort the farmer's pocketbook will always open willingly.

This is my concept of the gospel of the new and coming rural civilization. It is coming, certainly coming, though perhaps yet a long ways off, and yet perhaps nearer than we think. Until it does come our civilization, such as we have even in the city, is not on an enduring basis. Until it comes we shall continue to send to the city young men trained by their intense individualism and insufficient moral teaching to a purely selfish competition, to develop in the fierce competition and strife of the city the full fruits of the gospel according to Beelzebub: "Every fellow for himself the said Beelzebub controlling not merely the hindmost but the foremost as well. For the vices of the city, at least the more respectable vices, are simply the fuller development of the vices of the country.

The country church does not flourish, partly because of failure to preach the gospel as above outlined, and partly because forces operating at least through the entire Anglo-Saxon race are driving the farmer from the open country to the city--forces which he did not create, but which are sterilizing both the country church and the country school by driving the farmer from his farm. No such phenomenon as the drift of farmers by the thousands to the town to rot like "a fat weed on . . . Lethe wharf," or the pouring of country schools into city schools, or the drifting of tens of thousands of their sons and daughters to the city (whence they can not return because unfitted by city life for the life of the farm), would have been possible without some great underlying causes, which it is not in my province at this time to describe.

The consumer whether in the city or the country complains of the ever-increasing cost of living; the farmer of the ever-increasing cost of production and distribution. The food supply of this country can be doubled, but it can not be even materially increased until there are more skilled laborers on the farms. This skill can be acquired only on the farm, and can be retained on the farm only making life in the country satisfactory to those born on the farm. This can not be done without a material, intellectual, social and religious life in the open country, that will meet the wants of the country people young and old. A readjustment is inevitable, and there will be some severe jolts while it is being made; but the only way it can be made is by the development of a rural civilization that will be satisfying to those who in the future must feed and clothe the world.